

# **BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #39: CHRIST'S FORTY-DAY FAST**

**By John Temples**

(Note: this is an article I wrote which was published in the *Gospel Advocate*, November 3, 1983. The article was originally entitled "Christ's Forty-Day Fast: A New Perspective.")

---

Going without food for forty days is unthinkable for most of us. In fact, a forty-hour fast would be a test of endurance some of us could not pass! But our Lord, in preparation for His encounter with the devil, went without food for forty days. (Matthew 4:1-11.)

Abstinence from food for brief periods (one or two days) has physical benefits--poisons are flushed from the system and digestive organs are given a rest--but a prolonged fast puts a severe strain on the human system. The real purpose of such a sustained fast cannot be physical, but mental and spiritual-- a proof of one's self-control and devotion to God. David said, "I...chastened my soul with fasting." (Psalm 69:10.) A forty-day fast would be a test of the limits of endurance of not only the body, but the soul.

Forty days is not the record for fasting, however. In modern times, men have fasted for fifty, sixty or even seventy days, usually for purposes of social or political protest. Most died. But their prolonged fasts have provided scientists a unique opportunity to study the effects of long-term fasting on the human body...and have given us a startling new perspective on the forty-day fast of Jesus.

From October 27, 1980 to October 12, 1981 ten members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), in prison for terrorist activities, starved themselves to death in protest against the British presence in northern Ireland. Through news reports the world followed the final struggles of Bobby Sands, the first of the ten to die (at 66 days). He was followed by many other eager volunteers. Most died at about sixty days.

The horrors of their slow deaths are recounted in an article in *Time* magazine, August 17, 1981. The ordeal begins with extreme hunger, followed by stomach cramps, retching, drastic personality changes, inability to keep warm, weight loss, and loss of hearing and vision. The prisoners, according to autopsy reports, simply withered away. Sands weighed less than 100 pounds when he died.

This knowledge alone causes us to have a greater appreciation for what Jesus endured. But the most startling revelation in the article pertains to the length of the fast: forty days. Why exactly forty days? The *Time* article reports:

“At 42 days, *almost exactly*, a nightmarish experience occurs. They have been thoroughly warned, and the prisoners await the moment with great alarm. They are struck with something called nystagmus, a loss of muscular control due to severe vitamin deficiency. If they look sideways, their eyes begin to gyrate wildly and uncontrollably, first horizontally and then vertically.... Nystagmus also causes spells of constant vomiting and dizziness. The whole experience is terrifying and no amount of advance description can begin to prepare the strikers for the ordeal. When it ends, *usually right on schedule after four or five days*, they are enormously cheered up and for about a week go through a physical and psychological revival. *But now the end is not far off*. Their speech is slurred.... They are slowly going blind.”  
(P. 47, emphasis mine, JT.)

The lesson is this: Christ *knew exactly when to stop* to avoid nystagmus and its accompanying irreversible damage to His body. To have gone beyond forty days would have been pointless--it would have been to tempt God. Even in the throes of starvation, our Lord was completely in control of His faculties. The fact that He stopped at exactly forty days, obviously aware of what would follow two days later, is humbling and impressive proof that He was the Son of God.

How marvelous His love! How much He endured for our sakes! Does not His sacrifice persuade us to serve Him more? --John Temples